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ABSTRACT

The impact of the Channel One school newscasts on student knowledge of current events and on student attitudes was studied with tenth and eleventh graders in six suburban high schools in the Midwest. Three schools (464 students) received the newscast and the remaining schools (604 subjects) did not. Current events knowledge was assessed with a 20-item multiple choice test. Participants were also given a brief survey about their news interests and media consumption habits. There were no significant differences between the groups in terms of media use habits and interest in topics presented in news media. Students from the Channel One group scored better than the others on the current events test, although the difference was not as great as expected. The format of the program, its relatively small hard news content, and the distractions of the in-school viewing situation may account for the relatively small influence of the programs. In addition, most students preferred stories that dealt with sports and entertainment, so that student interest in hard news was not great to begin with. In general, results are consistent with those from other research. (Contains 30 references.) (SLD)

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Examining the Impact of the Channel One School Newscasts

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Examining the Impact of the Channel One School Newscasts

Evonne H. Whitmore

Educators began evaluating the possible impact of the Channel One news program even before it hit the airwaves more than four years ago. Few "so called" educational programs have dichotomized educators like the twelve minute daily newscast. However, despite its highly controversial status, Channel One's phenomenal growth has taken the nation's public schools by storm. There are now over 12,000 secondary schools nationwide which subscribe to the broadcasts (Johnson & Brzezinski, 1992).

The venture which is part of the program offering from the Whittle Communication Corporation is the largest school television project in the history of American education. Why have so many public schools signed? Some would suggest that the Whittle Corporation has made schools an offer they can't refuse. Whittle provides Channel One free of charge, along with other programs on its Classroom Channel and Education Channel to school systems which can guarantee at least 400 viewers. The package also includes a cabling setup, a 19-inch color television set for every classroom of 23 students, two video cassette recorders and a satellite dish to download the programs. The equipment becomes school property after 3 years (Whittle Communications, 1990, 1992). If all of this sounds too good to be true, it is. There is, of course, a "catch." There are two minutes of commercials sandwiched in the middle of each newscast. Many parents and educators question the appropriateness of allowing advertisements in the classroom, where students are a guaranteed captive audience (Rist, 1991).

The Research Issues and Questions

Many of the complaints about Channel One concern issues of "style over substance." The show is presented in a fast-paced edited format which is often compared to MTV (Music Television). Some fear that this approach to reporting the news may be more entertaining than it is informative (Maynard, 1990; Tate, 1989).

The findings have not always been consistent, but in fact, some studies do suggest that factors such as story

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length, presentation, visuals and redundancy are major contributors to how much information is acquired and retained from TV news (Wilson, 1974; Findolh & Hoijen, 1985; Brosius, 1989; Drew & Reese, 1984). Other researchers found that when news has been produced specifically for their age group, children have a better knowledge of government and politics, as well as a greater interest in public affairs (Dominick, 1972; Atkins & Gantz, 1978). Klein (1978), contrary to those findings, reports no significant relationship between viewer retention and interest and the way a news show is produced. Other research such as that by Gunter (1987) has shown that viewers generally forget most of what they see on television news programs.

America's teenagers, it appears, don't often care enough about current events to begin with. A recent study by Times Mirror Corporation (Rosentiel, 1990) found that young people are indifferent to current events because they can't relate to them. Social studies teachers across the country have also lamented what is described as a woeful lack of knowledge on the part of American high school students when it comes to current events (Finn & Ravitch, 1987). Do students who view Channel One, a program designed specifically for them, learn more about current events than students who do not? How do attitudes toward Channel One relate to current events test achievement? Is there a relationship between the primary method of news consumption and overall current events achievement scores? What, if any, relationship is there between interest levels in current events and overall current events achievement scores?

Method

To assess what current events knowledge students learned from watching Channel One, the authors administered a twenty item multiple choice test on current events to tenth and eleventh grade students. The instrument was drawn, with permission, from a compilation of items supplied by a Midwest regional bureau of the Associated Press. Founded in 1848, the AP is used by more American television stations than any other news service. The instrument was pre-tested with a group of freshmen orientation students at Kent State University in the fall of 1991. Slight changes in the structure of the exam were made in response to written comments from students in the pre-test group.

Six suburban high schools in the Midwest took part in the study. All of the schools shared a similar demographic and economic composition. Three of the schools with 464 subjects received the Channel One program. The remaining 604 subjects did not receive the news show. Questions on the knowledge test covered national and international news, business and sports. The news quiz covered a two week period from October 14 to October 25, 1991.

In addition, the participants were given a brief survey regarding their news interests and media consumption habits. Participants from the Channel One schools were also surveyed concerning their attitudes about the news program. To assess which items on the AP news quiz were actually covered by Channel One, the authors conducted a content analysis of the two weeks of programming covered during the study.

Results

Of the 1068 subjects 51.5 percent were tenth graders and 48.5 percent were eleventh graders. Eighty eight percent of the subjects in this racially homogeneous sample were white. Thirty percent of all of the subjects in the study said they paid more attention to current events which deal with entertainment. Thirty seven percent paid more attention to sports, seventeen percent to crime stories and six percent to politics.

The subjects paid the least attention to current events which deal with education, (three percent) and health issues (two percent). An analysis of the test results between the control and experimental schools revealed that students who viewed Channel One scored forty two percent on the current events quiz as compared to thirty six percent for students who did not view the program, resulting in what amounts to a one question difference on the exam. The standard deviation, levels of significance and means for each group are reported in Table One.

Table 1

Knowledge Test: Main Effects

	Control	Channel 1
n	604	464
%	36%	42%
Mean	7.27	8.48
Standard Deviation	2.42	2.93
F	52.89	
Level of Significance	.000	

As shown in Table Two, the Channel One students scored better on eleven questions at a statistically significant level, while the control group scored statistically better on five questions. Of the correct responses scored by both groups, Channel One viewers scored at a higher statistically significant level on five of seven questions, while the non-viewers scored significantly higher on one quiz item.

As expected, most indications of interest in current events were positively correlated with higher scores on the Associated Press quiz. As shown in Table Three, high school students who were interested in reading about current events, as well as had discussions about the news with family and friends, scored higher on the exam. By contrast, the study did not find strong correlations between interest levels in news from electronic media and scores on the quiz.

Most indications of interest in current events were positively correlated with higher scores on the Associated Press current events quiz.

The study found few indications that students who feel positive about having Channel One in their schools will necessarily do better on current events. Although in response to the survey item which stated, "I feel that I am better informed about current events as a result of Channel One," there was a significance of .006 as it related to scores on the Associated Press quiz (See Table Four).

Table 2

Statistically Significant Differences on Specific Questions:

	Overall	Reported by Channel 1
Channel One Superiority	11 questions	5
Control Group Superiority	5 questions	1
No difference	4 questions	2

Table 3

Correlations between Interest Level and Scores on AP Current Events Test

Correlation	Significance	
.005	none	How many hours per week do you view television newscasts?
-.08	.007	How many hours per week do you listen to radio newscasts?
.13	.000	How often do you read newspapers?
.09	.004	How often do you read News Magazines?
.11	.000	I am very interested in current events.
.08	.006	I talk with my family and friends often about current events.
.09	.004	I am very interested in reading and watching TV programs about current events.

Table 4

Correlations between Attitude and Scores on AP Current Events Test

Correlation	Significance	
.04	none	When "Channel One" is on in my school I usually pay close attention.
.06	none	When "Channel One" is on my teacher stops all other classroom activities so that I can give the show my full attention.
.04	none	Viewing "Channel One" has made me more interested in what is happening throughout the U.S. and around the world.
.09	.04	I have discussed stories I have seen on "Channel One" with others.
.05	none	I have read about topics that I first found out about on "Channel One."
.001	none	I have listened to radio news or watched television news more often since my school began showing "Channel One."
.13	.006	I feel that I am better informed about current events as a result of "Channel One."
.04	none	I have learned some history from "Channel One" that enriched my understanding of what is happening in different parts of the world.
.11	.011	I think that my school should keep "Channel One."

The study revealed no significant difference between Channel One viewers and the control group subjects regarding what media were used to consume news programs. The subjects said that they viewed or listened to electronic newscasts about three and a half hours per week. Those who responded to the survey items said they also read newspapers about three and one half times per week, as opposed to one and a half times per week for reading news periodicals such as *Time* or *Newsweek* magazines.

Discussion

The overall percentage of correct responses by subjects in the control and experimental groups on the Associated Press news quiz, although statistically significant, is of questionable educational importance. However, there may be several valid reasons why subjects from the Channel One group did not score as well as may be expected on the test, although better than the control group. First is the format of the program. Two minutes of the news show are filled with commercials and very little of the remaining ten minutes is actually filled with "hard news." Roughly four minutes of the show has a "hard news component," and very often these stories are recaps or updates of news items that have run previously during the week. The other half of the news hole is filled with features or human interest stories. The newsworthiness of these latter stories may be questionable. Although these may be the kind of stories students want to watch as indicated by our survey results, they are certainly not the stuff of which Associated Press quizzes are made. Many of the stories covered by the Associated Press quiz were simply not included in the Channel One newscast, thus possibly a reason for the weak scores. But since Channel One can only cover a limited amount of material as already noted, perhaps 8 out of 20 questions is not bad. It should be noted that there was a significant difference in the scores of Channel One students on several of the quiz items which were recapped. This result seems to suggest one area in which Channel One does show strength.

Taking into consideration that 37 percent of all students in the study said that they paid more attention to current events which deal with sports and 30 percent favor stories which deal with entertainment news, it is not surprising that the scores are weak by conventional test standards. When this is coupled with the actual hard news component of the Channel One program the argument is even more compelling.

Another reason which may account for the relatively poor performance by the Channel One students is that some of the students may not actually watch the entire program, because of less than model viewing situations during homeroom and lunchtime (Tiene, in press).

The Impact: Other Studies

How do the findings of this study compare with other such investigations of Channel One? The body of literature on Channel One is slowly being developed with studies such as this one.

In general, much of the related literature confirms the findings of this study. Although most students seem to be paying attention to the program, it appears that the impact is neither dramatic as hoped for by its supporters, nor as negative as its detractors thought it would be (Rudinow, 1990; Graves, 1990).

Results from an experimental pilot study on Channel One show that students who viewed the program scored 53 percent on a current events

test as compared to 36 percent for student who did not view the program (Rudinow, 1990). Another study conducted on students in a Cincinnati high school also reports higher scores in answers to test questions for Channel One viewers (Graves, 1990). Gorman and Primavera (1991) found the Channel One group had a correct response rate of 48 percent, compared to 38 percent for subjects in the control group. A similar study conducted on students in four suburban junior high schools in the Midwest, resulted in a sixty percent correct response rate for the experimental schools which viewed Channel One, while the Control schools scored 52 percent on the knowledge test (Tiene, in press).

By far the most comprehensive published study to date on Channel One has been conducted by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research in conjunction with the Interwest Applied Research Institute. Students from eleven schools in various regions of the country took part in this national study. Two current events tests were given within a four month period to students who viewed Channel One, as well as to students who had not seen the program. On both exams, the Channel One students exhibited a greater knowledge of current events as compared to the non-viewers, (3.3 percent better) getting only one more item correct on a thirty item quiz than the Control group (Johnson & Brzezinski, 1992). Obviously, the results of this study confirm these previous published and unpublished findings, albeit not impressively from an educational standpoint.

Summary and Conclusions: The Impact

Does Channel One have an educational role in our nation's schools? Should it? The jury may be decidedly still out on these questions. None of the studies on Channel One, including this one, has given it the resounding vote of confidence that its supporters have hoped for. Neither have the results indicated that it is having a negative impact on education (Streitfeld, 1992).

Perhaps, as it has been suggested, the real key to the program's effectiveness is linked to how classroom teachers tie in newscasts with other instruction (Supovitz, 1991). So while the educational gains from Channel One may at best be described as marginal, it is neither a "magic bullet" for meeting the current events learning needs of America's teenagers, nor is it a "smoking gun." The findings of this study do appear to show some evidence that Channel One is enjoying limited success.

It is now perhaps up to educators to take advantage of the hardware and other programs that are part of the Whittle package, to enlighten and enhance classroom instruction not only in current events, but in other areas of instruction as well.

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